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Cartographies of Pain: Remembering Violence and Displacement in the Fiction of Easterine Kire

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Abstract— *This paper examines the literary landscapes of Easterine Kire's fiction through the lens of memory, trauma, and embodied experience in the context of Northeast India. Kire's narratives provide a vital cartography of the socio-political ruptures that have marked the region, particularly the experiences of violence and displacement endured by its indigenous communities. Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept of* lieux de mémoire *(from "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire"), Marianne Hirsch's* postmemory*, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, and Judith Butler's ideas on grievability and precarity, this study investigates how Kire's protagonists preserve cultural memory and articulate personal pain amid systemic marginalization. The paper also invokes regional specificity to foreground how literary remembrance becomes a mode of resistance, healing, and identity reclamation.*

Keywords— ***Easterine Kire, Memory, Trauma, Northeast India, Cultural Resistance***

Easterine Kire is a pioneering voice in Indian English literature, particularly as one of the foremost writers to articulate the lived realities of Northeast India, a region historically marginalized in mainstream Indian discourse. Hailing from Nagaland, Kire's body of work is remarkable for its interweaving of history, oral traditions, myth, and contemporary socio-political issues. Her novels, such as *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), document the everyday struggles of Naga communities amid militarization, ethnic insurgency, and cultural erasure. Through richly textured characters and narratives rooted in indigenous epistemologies, Kire performs the dual task of witnessing historical trauma and preserving communal memory. Her work engages with the politics of marginality and the persistent effects of colonialism and postcolonial neglect in the region.

The literature of Northeast India occupies a complex space in Indian English literary canon. While postcolonial studies have often concentrated on the legacies of British imperialism, writers from the Northeast draw attention to the internal colonization and systemic neglect experienced by borderland communities. As Sanjib Baruah, an Indian professor of Political Studies at Bard College in New York, and an author and commentator specializing in the politics of Northeast India, argues, "India's frontier policy was shaped not by integration but by suspicion" (*India Against Itself* 45). Kire's fiction provides a counter-discourse to this marginalisation by mapping a landscape of affect where personal loss, collective trauma, and cultural survival converge. In this regard, her storytelling acts as a form of resistance that foregrounds the lived experiences and historical consciousness of Naga people.

In *Bitter Wormwood*, Easterine Kire constructs a poignant narrative that foregrounds memory as both a mode of cultural preservation and a form of political resistance. The protagonist, Moselie, serves not only as an individual navigating personal and political turmoil but also as a vessel through which layered histories—familial, communal, and national are remembered and reasserted. His life is intricately bound to the larger narrative of the Naga struggle, where personal memory becomes a conduit for collective consciousness. Kire's engagement with memory aligns with a French Historian, Pierre Charles Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire*, or "sites of memory,"

articulated in his essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire". Nora suggests that such sites emerge when the natural environments of memory begin to vanish, becoming locations "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 12). In Kire's narrative, however, these sites are not defined by physical markers; instead, they are embedded within oral traditions, familial relationships, ritual practices, and the sustaining power of language.

Kire's representation of memory is closely linked to indigenous knowledge systems, wherein oral history, storytelling, and intergenerational transmission are central to cultural survival. This is evident when Mosielie states, "Our people have never forgotten what they endured. We speak of it so the young ones know" (154). His words underscore a conscious refusal to forget, challenging historical erasure and asserting oral testimony as a legitimate form of archiving. Rather than serving merely as reflection, memory in this context becomes an act performed, repeated, and inherited ensuring that the weight of past suffering remains present and meaningful. In voicing such memory, Kire resists the silencing mechanisms often found in dominant national narratives that marginalize Northeast India's histories.

The theme of memory in *Bitter Wormwood* extends beyond personal recollection, emerging instead as a collective inheritance shaped by storytelling, ritual, and naming practices that sustain cultural identity across generations. Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* offers a useful framework here, as it captures how the trauma of earlier generations continues to shape the consciousness of those born after the event. In Kire's novel, memory functions not as a fixed narrative of the past but as a dynamic, embodied process through which individual identity and communal belonging are formed and transmitted.

This continuity is poignantly illustrated when Moselie names his grandson after his uncle, Vilalie, who was killed during the Naga conflict. "We named him Vilalie, so that the child would carry his memory forward. In our land, we do not forget our dead. We honour them by remembering" (*Bitter Wormwood* 20). This act of naming is more than familial reverence; it is a conscious form of resistance, embedding personal loss within the larger history of a people's struggle. In naming the child after a fallen loved one, memory becomes both a living legacy and a subtle form of political testimony.

Storytelling, too, serves as a crucial medium of remembrance. Moselie recalls how elders would recount events from the past to the younger generation, ensuring that what was endured would not be forgotten: "They told us not only what happened, but why it mattered. They said, 'You must remember so you will never be made to forget'" (*Bitter Wormwood* 22). These shared narratives are not simply oral histories; they are acts of instruction and affirmation, reinforcing the community's identity and resilience.

Kire also emphasizes ritual practices as living archives of cultural memory. Funerals, ancestral offerings, and communal festivals are not only spiritual or social gatherings—they are acts of remembrance. As one character reflects, "When we dance the old dances, we dance for those who are gone, and we let the young ones see how not to forget" (*Bitter Wormwood* 88). These rituals sustain continuity and resist the silencing of indigenous histories.

Through Moselie's story, Kire demonstrates how memory is not relegated to the past but carried forward—spoken, named, and enacted. In doing so, *Bitter Wormwood* becomes a quiet yet powerful affirmation of cultural survival and resistance through the intimate channels of family and tradition. Ultimately, Kire's novel becomes a *lieu de mémoire* in its own right a literary space that archives the silenced histories of a people. Through Moselie's narrative, she affirms that memory is not only a moral obligation but an essential strategy for cultural resilience and survival.

Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory helps illuminate how Kire portrays inherited trauma. In *Mari*, the titular character narrates her experiences during World War II, including the bombing of Kohima and its aftermath. "I remember the sound more than the sight. The sky was red and I thought the stars were falling," Mari recounts. Her recollections are eventually mediated through the narrator, who seeks to reconstruct Mari's world from fragments. The intergenerational nature of trauma transmission is central to Kire's vision, where history is always partial and mediated, yet emotionally potent. This transfer of trauma, filtered through postmemory, becomes a process of reconstructing identity and collective consciousness (Hirsch 108).

Cathy Caruth, a foundational figure in trauma theory, argues in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment of occurrence but returns in haunting repetitions. In *Bitter Wormwood*, Moselie's life is shaped by recurring memories of violence and betrayal during the Naga struggle. "Sometimes I hear the sounds in my dreams—the boots, the screams—and I wake up sweating," he confesses (*Bitter Wormwood* 121). The narrative's temporal shifts reflect the disjointed experience of trauma, where the past continually interrupts the present. This recursive temporality disrupts linear narrative

form and mirrors the psychological impact of unprocessed trauma (Caruth 4).

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry an American essayist and professor of English and American Literature and Language, emphasizes that pain resists verbal representation, often eluding direct articulation and manifesting instead through silence, gestures, or fragmented speech. This notion is profoundly relevant to Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, where the protagonist Dielieno endures emotional suffering within a domestic structure shaped by rigid gender expectations. The pain she experiences, rooted in emotional neglect, inequality, and control, is not always explicitly voiced but becomes evident through her withdrawn demeanor and internalized resentment. Sent to live with her authoritarian grandmother Vibano, Dielieno is subjected to a strict household that privileges male siblings and restricts female autonomy. Her labor is demanded without recognition, and her individuality is systematically suppressed. The disparity in affection and opportunity becomes a quiet source of anguish. Her silence, rather than a lack of suffering, reveals how cultural systems of power suppress the articulation of pain, especially in women. Thus, Kire's narrative mirrors Scarry's premise. While pain may resist language, literature offers a space where its contours can be traced through the unsaid. Dielieno's unexpressed pain, evident in her isolation, longing for fairness, and emotional withdrawal, serves as a subtle yet powerful indictment of oppressive familial and societal norms.

Judith Butler's concept of grievability is also pertinent here. In her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Butler argues that not all lives are equally grievable; certain deaths are rendered invisible by dominant discourses. Kire's fiction counters this by insisting on the worth of marginalized lives. In *Mari*, the deaths of ordinary civilians during the war are mourned not as collateral damage but as profound losses. "The names on the grave markers were not heroes, but they were ours," the narrator reflects. By giving voice to the ungrieved, Kire performs an ethical act of literary remembrance. Her insistence on grieving the 'unrecognized dead' destabilizes dominant war narratives that valorize only soldiers and heroes (Butler xv).

Displacement is also a recurrent theme in Kire's work. Whether through the literal dislocation of people during war (*Mari*) or the internal displacement caused by militarization (*Bitter Wormwood*), Kire portrays how movement and dislocation fracture identity and belonging. Yet, she also suggests that resistance lies in cultural continuity in storytelling, music, language, and ritual. These cultural acts become forms of counter-memory that offer healing and re-rooting. Moselie's participation in local storytelling sessions, his connection to village elders, and the preservation of language emerge as symbolic acts of resistance. "If we don't sing our songs, who will?" he asks (*Bitter Wormwood* 211)

Research professor at the Johns Hopkins University, Veena Das's notion of the everyday as a site of survival and resistance is relevant here. In Kire's fiction, the banal routines of cooking, singing, or praying are imbued with political significance. These acts serve not merely as background to larger historical events but as modes of asserting humanity against dehumanizing forces. "We cooked even when the bombs fell; we prayed even when we were hungry," says Mari (60). The ordinariness of survival becomes a radical act in a context marked by state violence and socio-political fragmentation (Das 6). Dielieno's slow reclaiming of her voice through diary writing and her subtle acts of disobedience show how the domestic realm can become a site of subtle resistance.

Furthermore, Kire challenges patriarchal structures within her community. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, she critiques the internalized misogyny and rigid gender roles that constrain Naga women. The trauma in this novel is as much emotional and cultural as it is political. Here, Kire aligns with feminist trauma theorists who argue for a gendered reading of pain and resilience. Her depiction of women's inner lives, their resistance through memory and narrative, offers a feminist intervention into both literary and cultural discourses of the Northeast. Dielieno's quiet rebellion against her grandmother's oppressive expectations becomes a metaphor for generational resistance against inherited trauma. "I wasn't going to be her. I'd be my own woman," Dielieno asserts.

Easterine Kire's fiction is an act of witnessing, mourning, and cultural reclamation. Her narratives are not merely literary explorations of pain but ethical interventions into the silence surrounding Northeast India's fraught history. By mobilizing theories of memory, trauma, embodiment, and resistance, this paper has shown how Kire's work contributes to both regional and global conversations on violence, displacement, and healing. Her writing reminds us that literature does not just reflect trauma—it reshapes it into forms of remembrance that endure. In doing so, Kire expands the cartography of Indian literature to include those terrains too often left unmapped.

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